

# Editorial

## FT View

### Getting a fair deal

ALL actions have consequences. A nation grieved when three youth were killed after the Army fired into a civilian protest and cracked down on an appeal for clean water. The factory that was at the centre of this pollution scandal has been roundly blamed as responsible for the contamination of water in the Weliveriya area, a charge that the factory has vehemently denied.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa's office announced on Monday what the Government described as "solutions" to the water issue in the town of Weliveriya two weeks after the tragic events unfolded.

Chairing a high powered, multi-stakeholder meeting, Rajapaksa gave several orders as part of resolving the crisis over contaminated ground water and alleged pollution by blue chip Dipped Products Plc's subsidiary, Venigross Ltd. which employs 600 and manufactures medical gloves for export.

A statement from the President's Office noted that the Government Analyst will conduct an analysis of the water and if it is proved that the factory was responsible, it would be shut down.

Even if the factory is proved to be innocent of the water contamination allegations, it will be moved from the Weliveriya area and relocated to an industry zone under the Board of Investment (BOI), which is the Government's investment arm.

The news will come as a relief to residents in a dozen villages around the Rathupaswala area. The heavy police and army guard that has been provided for the factory will likely ease once the assurances have reached people.

However, foreign investors and the private sector in general have not been delivered a positive message. The point being made is that even a legally functioning factory that is not responsible for pollution will still be shifted, no doubt at great expense and loss of livelihood, to another part of the country to protect political blushes and official ineptitude.

No doubt the Government will be keen to score political points after the shooting and regain some semblance of support in the SLFP stronghold of Gampaha. Lines were clearly drawn after Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapaksa openly apologised to the people in Weliveriya through an interview in a daily Sinhala paper earlier this week.

However, the factory is being painted blacker than necessary, one can argue, as tests have not conclusively proven that Venigross is single-handedly responsible for the quality drop in groundwater.

Dipped Products exports 5% of global medical gloves, an impressive feat given Sri Lanka's lacklustre record on industrial and manufactured exports. In fact, parent company Hayleys has a long and respected track record for doing business in the island and the 19-year-old factory managed a peaceful co-existence with residents till about three years ago when the water situation sprang to the surface.

If authorities had paid proper attention to the residents' complaints and isolated the cause in a responsible and transparent manner when it first cropped up, then the events of 1 August would never have happened. After the events have boiled over, there is danger that the factory is being made a convenient scapegoat for this serious oversight. Justice cannot be achieved unless all parties are treated fairly and Venigross cannot be left to suffer the burden of responsibility alone if it is proved innocent.



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# Social instability – A recipe for economic downturn and beyond

A true picture emerged from Weliveriya when brute force was employed to address the grievances of people who have been affected by a social malady in the area. The incident was watched by all citizens of the country and became a topic of discussion among concerned citizens of this island.

A trend also emerged as similar force was used in quelling unrest in other parts of the country. The victims were often found to have been ordinary citizens of this country who are struggling to live yet another day.

If there were social issues, a Government with a massive Cabinet of Ministers would have found plenty of answers at the Cabinet meetings. There was absolutely no necessity to deploy armed forces when the situation demanded simple remedies.

Sentiments grew high among free zone employees when the Government introduced the private pension funds. Yet again extreme force was used to quell the tense situation. The Government would have expected that the public would react angrily when their money is touched.

A common sense approach to reforms in social benefits would have dictated that a policy decision, touching the sentiments of employees, would end up in streets. The then UNP Government was hounded over using the 'cycle chain' as the weapon for suppressing industrial unrest. But the bullet is even more dangerous than cycle chains.

Unrest in prison led to a mini war in Dematagoda. The US Department of State's Country Report for 2012 states: "Prison conditions were poor and did not meet international standards due to overcrowding and the lack of sanitary facilities. In many cases prisoners reportedly slept on concrete floors and often lacked natural light or sufficient ventilation. According to prison officials and civil society sources, prisons designed for approximately 11,000 inmates held an estimated 32,000 prisoners. More than 13,000 of these prisoners either were awaiting or undergoing trial." This speaks volumes of inadequacies in our penal rehabilitation system.

### Undercurrents of social discontent

There are still undercurrents of social discontent in many other areas. According to leading social theorists, there is a likelihood that any situation would evolve into a violent protest when social equilibrium is disturbed.

The economic situation is not at all palatable and people are still struggling with their day-to-day survival. Yet, one could ask, how come there are stretched limousines for hire in this tiny island?

Economic performance has not been up to expectations. The Government must sit back and take stock of the situation. There is a pressing need to stop all extravagant expenses and the number of Ministers must be reduced to an acceptable level.

All loss-making State enterprises must be rehabilitated with the help of strategic partners either from overseas or from within Sri Lanka. When there is social instability it would drive away foreign investors and bring a bad reputation to the country. It would also increase the political risk ratings, which are harmful to economic growth. Politics is about the art of governance and requires pragmatic and down to earth solutions.

There have been incidents of violence directed at other religions' institutions. The Government must not be seen to be associating with or giving moral support for such minority of extreme fanatical groups who are hell-bent on advancing their own agendas diluting the pluralistic nature of the country.

Of course Buddhism is the foremost religion of this country and it has Constitutional safeguards. Other religious minorities too have been in existence from time immemorial and all shades of religious freedom and expression must be accorded to minorities. The country's reputation as a tolerant society would suffer irreparable harm if we disturb religious sentiments among the minorities.

### Crisis at CPC and CEB and industrial unrest

There is a crisis in the two important State corporations involved with energy, a key area where any disruption in supply would cause a groundswell of public protests. A careful watch must be kept over these two institutions.

Political pragmatism calls for quick fixes and the longer the issue is neglected, the more serious the ramifications. A prudent Government would never isolate the masses; rather it must keep the masses solidly behind the Government.

The importance of the much-valued war victory would be soon forgotten if the 'heat of the stomach' goes beyond tolerable levels. The basic necessities of the people must be provided at reasonable cost.

The cost of living has been a hot topic of discussion for decades and nothing seems to have been done to contain rising inflation. Inflation would cause social instability which would in turn create a rupture in the law and order situation. This would then galvanise the masses into action at the behest of political forces, which are ever-ready for an opportunity, as is the practice all over the world.

There is a simmering issue with the Federation of University Teachers Association (FUTA). The public sector employees are also demanding a hike

in their salaries. Industrial unrest would be the worst that any government would shun. The transport sector is also affected as it has a direct impact on the cost of fuel. Railway unions are also up in arms over salary anomalies. Transport is a key factor in economic development and a breakdown would cripple the flagging economy.

### Police brutalities and inaction

The Police force is the most corrupt organisation in Sri Lanka. A senior Police officer has been arrested over contract killings and this is a clear manifestation of the level to which the Police force has been relegated. Can an ordinary citizen trust the Police force anymore?

There have been deaths in Police custody and still the trend continues with no solution in sight. Is the Police station a court of law where officer-in-charge determines that the suspect deserves much harsher punishment before the suspect is produced before a competent court? Why should there be law courts if Police can dispense justice according to their whims and fancies? Is not this making a mockery of the judicial system?

The Judiciary too is corrupt but still the due process of law must be continued. Can an elected Government tolerate this type of situation? These types of incidents could very well be exploited by separatist lobby which is hell bent on tarnishing the image of Sri Lanka. There is a massive anti-Sri Lanka campaign overseas and Government does not seem to have positioned itself to meet the challenge from the formidable pro-separatist lobby.

What measures has the Government taken to inculcate discipline in the Police force? On the contrary, what the Government did was do away with the salutary 17th Amendment to the Constitution, which had a semblance of hope for depoliticising public services. It is highly unlikely that the 17th Amendment would be reinstated but its reinstatement would certainly augment the Government's standing in the eyes of the international community.

*(The writer is a freelance journalist and a political lobbying and government affairs consultant. He is also a member of the American Association of Political Consultants.)*

## Guest Column



By Srinath Fernando

### FT Quotes

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